



Middle Grades Spotlight

A Newsletter for California's Middle Grades Educator

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"There is no single right way to organize a middle school. However, some ways are more effective than others. Because the implementation of the essential characteristics of effective middle schools does not ensure excellence, each program element in place should be examined and its qualitative level assessed."
Taking Center Stage, page 103

Schools To Watch – *Taking Center Stage*

The Journey to High-Performance Begins with Collaborative Self-Assessment

Becoming a high-performing middle school is a journey not a destination. It is an annual pilgrimage of collaborative self-assessment and continual refinement of programs and practices leading to enhanced learning outcomes for each and every student. A dynamic middle school is never really "there" because just as educators think they have a handle on the answers, the questions and the issues shift and change. What does not change is the critical mass of common characteristics of high-performing middle schools and their willingness to seek solutions.

In 2003 four middle schools were selected as high-performance models in the Schools To Watch - *Taking Center Stage* program that was sponsored through a partnership of the California Department of Education, the California League of Middle Schools (CLMS), the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), and the California Middle Grades Partnership Network (CMGPN). These selected schools are certainly not the only California schools that are high-performing or deserving of recognition, but these are the schools that "stepped up to the plate" and applied, met the high implementation standards in a majority of the dynamics being measured, and are willing to share the successes and challenges of their journey.

The first step that each school took was to assess itself using the four performance rubrics < <http://www.cde.ca.gov/gs/mg/documents/criteria.pdf> > developed from the vision of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and aligned to the recommendations in California's middle grades handbook, *Taking Center Stage*. On an implementation scale from low to high, school staff members collaboratively determined where they were and where they needed to improve. The four performance rubrics focus on academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational processes that support accelerated and sustained improvement at the school.

In this issue of the *Middle Grades Spotlight*, principals from each of the four Schools To Watch - *Taking Center Stage* share with readers the value of collaborative self-assessment, how it leads to a school's discussion of strengths and areas of challenge, and eventually to the collaborative action that makes the difference. (A virtual tour of these four schools is now available on the CLMS Web site: < <http://www.clms.net/> >.) Whether or not a school applies for the distinction of becoming a recognized model, collaborative self-assessment is always the first step in the journey of becoming a high-performing middle school.

Rozlynn Worrall, Administrator
Middle Grades Office



In the Spotlight

Castaic Middle School, Castaic, California

– One of California's 2003 Schools to Watch – *Taking Center Stage* Model Schools –

Wherever a school finds itself in the improvement process, the Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* self-assessment rubric becomes a valuable tool to evaluate, validate, and motivate. It is a tool that allows a school to focus on all four areas or on any part of the whole.

School Profile

Community:	Suburban
District:	Castaic Union
Enrollment:	1819
Grade Levels:	4-8
API for 2002:	746
Demographics:	
68% White	
22% Hispanic/Latino	
5% Filipino/Pacific Islander	
3% Black/African American	
2% Asian	
English Learners:	5%
Reduced/Free Lunch:	14%
Calendar:	Traditional

Castaic Middle School chose to have its entire staff evaluate the four rubric areas, and in the process they were pleased to note that some programs were validated and other areas needed improvement. The self-discovery provided the motivation to either maintain programs that were supportive to the students and staff or to focus on improvement in other areas. When the eight application writers came together to discuss the information collected, it became clear that the four specific areas would become foci of improvement immediately, regardless of whether or not Castaic was named a Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* Model School.

A common theme was how we could return to a true middle school philosophy after having fourth and fifth graders on campus for the last six years and after having experienced great growth in staff and students. The small middle school of 800 students had grown to 1800! Being the only middle school in an elementary school district, we wanted our own identity and needed to create a staff development committee devoted to middle grades issues. The staff needed to be retrained on identifying middle grades characteristics, incorporating relevancy into their lesson plans, planning interdisciplinary lessons, and keeping the ever-present standards in view. We have started the process, and the challenge will be to revisit the rubric on a regular basis to evaluate, validate, and motivate.

Marcia Dains, Principal

Castaic Middle School
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Key Academic Supports

(Excerpts taken from Castaic's School to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* 2003 application.)

- Students participate in student-led conferences and eighth grade portfolio day.
- Vertical teams align curriculum to state standards and collaboratively review student work samples against rubrics throughout the year.
- Grade level, academic, interdisciplinary teams create small learning communities and differentiated instruction for students in grades seven and eight. Sixth grade students are in a three-period core, self-contained class.
- A collaborative resource model for students with special needs allows full access to rigorous curriculum.
- English learners are provided an English language development class and content support class. Instructional aides provide support to clustered students in core content areas.
- Library/media center is open to the community and families on Wednesday evenings where classes in parenting, English, and computer skills are offered.



In the Spotlight

Culver City Middle School, Culver City, California

– One of California's 2003 Schools to Watch – *Taking Center Stage* Model Schools –

School Profile

Community:	Urban
District:	Culver City Un.
Enrollment:	1646
Grade Levels:	6-8
API for 2002:	706
Demographics:	
	40% Hispanic/Latino
	26% White
	19% Black/African American
	10% Asian
	4% Filipino/Pacific Islander
	.3% American Indian
	.5% Other
English Learners:	12%
Reduced/Free Lunch:	33%
Calendar:	Traditional

For Culver City Middle School, the Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* self-assessment rubric was a useful tool in evaluating our school programs and instructional practices. The rubric was divided into four sections: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Structure and Processes. While we felt that we had a variety of programs and strong standards-based instruction, it was valuable to assess them using criteria based on *Taking Center Stage*. It confirmed many of our strengths, but it also pointed out some weaknesses that needed to be addressed.

This evaluation made us look at our school from a more objective perspective. Through the Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* rubric, we reviewed all aspects of our school learning community, and we began working on strengthening those areas that needed improvement.

We felt that we were strong in areas such as block scheduling, providing comprehensive health and counseling services, and fostering a culture in which students feel safe and secure. An area of needed improvement, which we will address in 2003-2004, is expanding differentiated instruction to all classrooms to meet the needs of all students.

As a Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* model school, the challenge is not to become complacent but to continue to build on our strengths, to address our areas of need, and to provide the best educational environment and programs for our school community.

Patricia Jaffe, Principal

Culver City Middle School
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Key Academic Supports

(Excerpts taken from Culver City's School to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* 2003 application.)

- State standards provide a framework for curriculum. Teachers attend curricular meetings to share successful instructional strategies and ensure a high level of instruction.
- Block scheduling, with the goal of building smaller learning communities, provides extended learning opportunities for students to engage in projects such as science labs that apply state standards to hands-on learning situations.
- Interdisciplinary approach is illustrated through the wide range of programs and activities offered. Writing, reading across content areas, and technology are found in all core and elective classes.
- Students are supported and challenged through heterogeneous class groupings schoolwide. All teachers receive ongoing training in implementing differentiated instructional techniques.
- A health clinic is located on campus to provide medical attention, family life information, and individual or group counseling.
- Grade level teaming provides teachers with the opportunity to create thematic units of instruction across curricular areas.



In the Spotlight

Rogers (Samuel Curtis) Middle School, San Jose, California

– One of California's 2003 Schools to Watch – *Taking Center Stage* Model Schools –

School Profile

Community:	Urban
District:	Moreland El.
Enrollment:	649
Grade Levels:	6-8
API for 2002:	785
Demographics:	
45% White	
27% Hispanic/Latino	
21% Asian	
4% Black/African American	
2% Filipino/Pacific Islander	
English Learners:	31%
Reduced/Free Lunch:	19%
Calendar:	Traditional

Planning and executing a successful Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* process was similar to preparing for my son's wedding. There were so many details to be worked out for both events. Small groups worked together, each with a specific purpose. They reviewed what had been successful in the past and incorporated the many important traditions that exemplified our different cultures. The day of my son's wedding and our school visit finally came, and our important guests began arriving. From the very beginning, I knew that things would go well. In fact, I knew this long before each "big day" because we have what is necessary to make people feel special.

For the wedding we used a wedding planner. At our school the key planning document was the Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* self-assessment rubric. We used the rubric as a guide to assess our progress on our journey towards middle school excellence. It was a very time consuming but affirming process. We worked with various constituent groups to understand their perceptions. Knowing where we were helped us set goals for the future. Decisions must be made and priorities set. For example, on our road to an advisory program, it became clear that it was important that each student have at least one adult that they could depend upon.

At Rogers Middle School the real work is just beginning. We are receiving visits and inquiries from throughout the country and this is keeping us on our toes. We presented at the California League of Middle Schools Conference and our teachers felt special as they networked with other educators. Our school is "open for company" at all times and even the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Jack O'Connell, visited our school. With all this attention, our staff and students are rising to the occasion. Our parents are also helping out more than ever. As one student said to me, "All this attention makes me want to work harder. I kind of like it."

The real challenges in the future for my son and for our school are similar. A primary issue is simply one of money. Supporting a family is a top priority, and so it is with our school. With budget cutbacks and funding issues, priorities based upon the self-assessment criteria have been and will be established. Using the Schools to Watch – *Taking Center Stage* rubric has also been a part of prioritizing our use of funds. We have also formed a much closer parent school alliance as parents are taking on more instructional roles. They are being trained and supported. When times get tough, the families that survive and thrive are those who come together. At Rogers, our family is stronger than ever.

Gary Stebbins, Principal
Rogers Middle School
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In the Spotlight

Silverado Middle School, Roseville, California

– One of California's 2003 Schools to Watch – *Taking Center Stage* Model Schools –

School Profile

Community:	Suburban
District:	Dry Creek Jt.
Enrollment:	1123
Grade Levels:	6-8
API for 2002:	809
Demographics:	
78% White	
11% Hispanic/Latino	
4% Asian	
2% Black/African American	
2% Filipino/Pacific Islander	
2.4% Other	
English Learners:	4%
Reduced/Free Lunch:	8%
Calendar:	Year Round-Single Track

Silverado Middle School is committed to continual growth and improvement. We saw the Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* application process as an opportunity to closely examine our programs. The rubric, provided as part of the application process, was critical to our self-analysis. The entire staff was involved in collecting data to address the components of the rubric. We had many meaningful conversations about what we do well for our students. We also took time to analyze our shortcomings and to talk about areas for growth.

As we developed our master schedule for this year, we added an Academic and Community Excellence (ACE) class for each team. The ACE class was designed to meet the needs of at-risk students by providing study skills, homework support, and a high level of communication with parents. As a result of our data collection for the Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* process and the feedback we received from site visitors, we have designated this program as an area for improvement. Although many effective strategies have been used to address the needs of the ACE students, we realized that there is not a clear plan in place for the teachers of this class. The ACE teachers will be meeting as a team to share and discuss effective strategies and to develop a plan for the class. In addition, we are working with the district to determine what resources and professional development could be provided to support the program.

As we completed the Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* rubric, we also realized that we use our team structure very effectively for communication about students and curriculum; however, we have not utilized the teams to their fullest potential for integrating across content areas. Next year we hope to work in teams to develop cross-curricular projects for groups of students to work on in each of their classes. The projects will also incorporate standards-based performance assessments so that students have meaningful ways to demonstrate and apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired.

The Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* process has created energy and focus around very specific goals for Silverado's future. We are looking forward to continuing our growth as we learn from other schools and to sharing our successes with others.

Brad Tooker, Former Principal

Silverado Middle School
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Resources & News

Searching for High-Performing Middle Schools in 2004

Once again California's Schools to Watch - *Taking Center Stage* Model School program is seeking high-performing middle schools to serve as models in 2004. Sponsored through a partnership of the California Department of Education, the California League of Middle Schools (CLMS), the Association of California School Administrators, and the California Middle Grades Partnership Network, the invitational materials will be posted on the CLMS Web site by August 15, 2003. Applications will be due by October 31, 2003, and school visits are scheduled to occur in December of 2003 and January of 2004. <<http://www.clms.net/stw/index.htm>>

Middle Grades School Improvement Self-Study

The Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois developed a self-study process for schools to gather reliable data about their practices and progress towards school improvement. The School Improvement Self-Study is a data collection system that collects data focused on the academics and socio-behavioral development of students provided by teachers, principals, students and parents. Results from the survey are reported to the school to assist them in improving its teaching and learning process. <<http://www.cprd.uiuc.edu/self-study/Self-Study.htm>>

National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform – Schools to Watch

The Schools to Watch initiative was launched by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform in 1999. The National Forum identified four schools across the United States that were on their way to meeting their criteria for high performance. These four schools are showcased via a virtual tour on the National Forum's Web site. <<http://www.schoolstowatch.org/what.htm>>

California League of Middle Schools (CLMS)

CLMS has announced a Call for Presenters for its 2004 Annual Conference to be held on March 12-14, 2004, in San Jose, California. The application is now available online. <<http://www.clms.net/forms>>

California Department of Education (CDE)

The CDE announced the availability of their new *Fact Book 2003, Handbook of Education Information*. The annual *Fact Book* is a collection of statistics and information on subjects of interest to educators, legislators, and the public. <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fb/index/asp>>

Looking Ahead...

Year 2003

- Aug. 6–8** CLMS Summer Literacy Conference *Closing the Language Gap: Improving Literacy in Mixed Ability Classrooms* is to be held in Indian Wells, CA. Keynote speakers are Dr. Kate Kinsella and Dr. Kevin Feldman. <<http://www.clms.net/forms>>
- Fall** California Middle Grades Partnership Network Coordinators' quarterly meeting. Location TBA. Contact Veronica Maestas at midnet@cde.ca.gov
- Nov. 6–8** NMSA *Middle Level on Our Minds* 39th Annual Conference—Atlanta, Georgia. <<http://www.nisma.org/>>

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